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ABSTRACT

A course in introductory Greek was introduced as part of a freshman seminar program at William Patterson College of New Jersey. The course was distinctive in that the instructor undertook to learn the subject along with the students. The goal of the course was that the students would learn something about Greek, about language in general and about their own native language in particular, and about the more abstract notion of "learning about learning." Each person in the class, including the instructor-learner, started with an autobiographical report that included motivations and previous experience with language-learning. Class time was spent in studying the Greek language, with particular attention to the Greek alphabet, transliteration from Greek to English and vice-versa, cognate study, and the vocabulary and grammar of the first nine lessons of the textbook used in the course. The study of grammar and syntax highlighted problems with English syntax in the critical areas of Greek case inflection and verb endings contrasted with word order in English and the English system of auxiliary verbs. While the student evaluations were not overwhelmingly positive, the course was thought to have enough value to bear repetition using a differert language. (AMH)

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ANCIENT LANGUAGE AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL: REPORT ON AN EXPERIMENT

by

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This paper describes an educational experiment undertaken in the Fall of 1978 at William Paterson College of New Jersey. The auspices for the project was our federally funded Freshman Seminar Program, a college-wide attempt to engage freshmen, chosen at random, in learning situations designed to broaden the often narrow scope of experience normally encountered by state college students in rather heavily career-oriented degree programs.

The Freshman Seminar system offers a selection of courses congregated in "modes," which, being essentially designations of course style, do not actually specify content area of subject matter. I chose to work within the "Master Learner" mode which stipulates that an instructor will undertake to learn along with a group of students a a subject he himself does not know: being an educated person,

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the instructor ought to be a good model for the students' own learning. I was pleased with this structured opportunity to add to my own education while contributing to a new campus venture. Without really considering the implications for pedagogic success, I selected a study of classical Greek as our topic. Admittedly one of my prime motivations was the wish to learn a little about a language I had never studied; but, then again, since the students would be watching me learn, such a personal enthusiasm would serve the needs of the course in an additionally appropriate way.

The notions of this mode include not regarding the subject matter itself as the absolute goal of the course; it is assumed that a difficult subject will not be mastered in a single semester, but will be used as the format for a somewhat more general learning experience. In using a foreign language— especially one so far removed from contemporary students' educational, practical and philosophical concerns — I envisioned that the students would not only learn something about this language, but about language in general, about their own native language in particular, and about one far-distant culture, all in addition to the more abstract notion of "learning about learning" that is provided for by the very format and assumption of the course procedure.

Because of the unusually intense central role of the teacher/model in this class, a certain amount of autobiographical account is pertinent not just to a report of the project, but directly to the students as well so that they can witness my motivations and the vantage points from which I am approaching our subject. As a musician who regularly teaches music theory and analysis, I routinely deal with information encoded in a special, esoteric system; music presents communicable utterances of a special kind. On both these counts, the analogy to language is clear. Furthermore, however, I have always had an interest in human language, even though my facility in speaking and reading foreign languages is not marked. I studied Latin and French in high school, French and German in college; and I have always valued my familiarity with Latin. I have come to know some Italian (principally because of its usefulness in music) and Chinese (out of an interest in the culture). Smatterings of Hebrew and Yiddish were part of my upbringing; and my understanding of English was enriched during college by studies of linguistics and (in a course on Chaucer) Middle English.

The picture thus presented to the class, then, is one of an educated and interested learner approaching a subject not professionally related to his own field of endeavor, but one close to his intellectual interests, and presumably avail-

able to him on the basis of his past history of learning in language. My own lack of talent in actual fluency in other languages, freely announced to the students, could here be seen as a positive factor, since the students would not feel that they needed a special ability to follow along with me. And my past attempts at casual self-learning in a few languages would additionally recommend me to them as a model learner.

It should be emphasized that although this picture was earnestly presented to the students (who were asked to reciprocate by describing their own history with languages—both in school and in the home — as well as their own educational and vocational goals) they yet responded with, by and large, a good deal of skepticism, ranging to incomprehension and even hostility. (It should be pointed out that, as they were chosen at random for this project, they had no foreknowledge of the subject to be tackled within the mode they selected.) One of my initial challenges, then, was to utilize my enthusiasm in ways that took into account their own needs, inclinations and attitudes. I quickly learned, for example, that it did me no good — was detrimental to our purposes, in fact — to say something on the order of "Wouldn't it be terrific if, after a semester's work, we could translate the first few lines of The Iliad?" — a comment that only

puzzled the students. Much more pertinent, according to my later discoveries in the course, would have been: "Wouldn't it be interesting to be able to express our own names in Greek letters?"

At the same time, and especially as the true complexity of even the primitive levels of the subject was discovered by the class, it was important continually to remind the students that they were not expected actually to master the materials of the Greek language: we would be <u>using</u> the study of Greek as a focus for other kinds of learning.

But here I must immediately point out that I came to learn that too much attention to these larger, vaguer aspects of the course was, perhaps paradoxically, ultimately threatening to our entire purpose. Thus, were we to proceed largely by discussions of "learning," or even "the nature of language" or "Greek culture," we would not have gotten around to testing the true idea of the course: to learn about these things <u>through</u> the actual study of our particular subject, in all its detail. We basically spent our time studying the Greek language; and I developed a firm conviction that only by attention to the real learning matter at hand would the objects of the broader learning experience be met. Of course, due to the one-semester duration of the course and the special purposes of the project, our course of study differed greatly

from the standard study of a language; but this will be described shortly.

In consultation with a faculty member in foreign languages at our college, I chose our text: A New Introduction To Greek by Chase and Phillips (Harvard). This book was our sole tool, and the prime daily focus of the course. I was careful not to tackle the book in advance, so that the students would genuinely watch me in the initial stages of contact with the material. In addition, however, I did speak with a recognized classics scholar whose name I got from a mention in The New Yorker of the intensive summer course in Greek offered by the City University of New York. This professor answered questions that arose after a few weeks of the course had gone by (points that seemed ambiguous in the text, and which were agreed upon by the students as being problematical). Aside from this single consultation and the use of the textbook, no other influences or help were present. Incidentally, I made sure to describe to the students both how I arrived at the choice of text and how I found our consultant's name. (Since we were dealing with an ancient language, it did not seem necessary to use additional aids for pronunciation in the form of native speakers or recordings.)

Learning the Greek alphabet was our first task, and this itself brought to the fore many of the larger issues of the

course. For example, in dealing with pronunciation of combinations of Greek letters, the students needed to arrive at handy English equivalents of the Greek units (particularly the diphthongs); this in turn resulted in a forceful confrontation with the sounds of English and their orthographic representation. This confrontation was active in the constant work in transliteration we performed to focus our pronunciation. To take a Greek word and express it in English letters, it was necessary for the students to examine critically the sounds they were making when pronouncing the Greek word so that they could think of English letters that would form a fairly unambiguous equivalent. To clarify this endeavor, we avoided any standard dictionary practice of developing special signs for agreed-upon sounds, but chose instead combinations of letters familiar from very common words (the 'ay' of 'say' for example, for the eta sound) as needed. Such a word, then, as γνώμη would not unambiguously be rendered by 'gnomae' since the quality of the vowels is not certain; rather, the rendering 'gnoh-may' seemed suitable. Often I would willfully mispronounce a student's suggested transliteration by seizing upon any possible ambiguity in his use of English letters.

At the same time, we found reverse transliteration (from English words into Greek letters) to be an unusual and stimu-

lating exercise. Here, too, students needed to analyze their speech sounds carefully in order to arrive at correct results. The English word 'toy,' for example, would (after the initial consonant) call for the 'aw' of omicron plus the 'ee' of iota. Again, the analysis of English dipthongs was a particularly focused version of this procedure. And I found in general that critical attention to English phonics was a new experience for the students.

Clearly the amount of time we spent studying the Greek alphabet, and especially all of the related work in transliteration in both directions, is not a feature of the standard study of Greek. But the extent to which the hours spent on these problems helped the students think about their own language as well as the general question of sound-making in languages was satisfying in an unanticipated way. (We also came to note, for example, that certain English sounds - like 'j' - are unavailable in Greek. And we discussed instances of extra-Greek uses of Greek letters, as in modern technical fields.)

Learning vocabulary was likewise useful beyond the ordinary end of translation: for we devoted much attention to the broadly engaging matter of cognates. This aspect of language seemed to fascinate the students, who perhaps were not so accustomed to witnessing the reflections of Latin or even

Romance languages in English. The tracing of cognates, like transliteration, was — again in contrast to what I imagine is usual in the normal study of Greek — thus heavily emphasized. Also, as with transliteration, the work proceeded in both directions. On the final examination, for example, I asked the students to confront the English words 'geology' and 'geography' and compare and contrast them according to their probable Greek antecedents. Here they would discover that in both cases the root γῆ accounted for the 'earth' portion of the meanings; whereas in the first case the '-ology' derives from λόγος (= reason), while the '-ography' of the second case derives from γραφω (the verb 'to write'). Thus the first word: "reasoning about the earth;" and the second: "writing down the earth" (maps).

In these areas of our work the students made many fascinatingly naive errors, suggesting avenues of further exploration and clarification. In transliteration, for example, someone might mistake the <u>name</u> of a Greek letter for its <u>pronunciation</u>: the word πως would become 'pie-ohs.' I found it useful to challenge such a student by asking if the English word 'dot' ought to be pronounced 'dee-ot.' In cognate work, the students would sometimes draw falso cognates by attending only to the phonics of the term, exclusive of its lexical essence: hence λόγος (= reason) would suggest 'log'

rather than 'logic.' More strikingly, such a word as τρίπους (= three-footed) might suggest not 'tripod', but 'tripods'! Here the puzzling assumption was that the typical nominative-masculine-singular 's' in Greek had anything to do with the standard plural 's' in English. But this error leads us directly to the truly central problem of the course: grammar.

The study of Greek grammar and syntax produced our most energetic struggles, our most revealing errors, and our nearly intractable problems. Here above all were the students confronted with abstract aspects of language largely foreign to them, for so much grammar is so well hidden in the syntax of English, and thus only dimly perceived, if at all, by most of them. The first of these critical areas was the notion of <u>case inflection</u> for nouns, pronouns and adjectives. Indeed at first it was essential to remind the students of the very meanings of these parts of speech. They next needed to discover the fundamental problem in older languages: what in English is handled by word-order and the use of prepositions is typically in an older language managed by case inflection.

Thus, it was first necessary to review simple English sentences in order to distinguish, say, betweem the nominative 'house' of "The house is big" and the accusative "version" in "I bought that house." Nevertheless, word order continued

to hold such sway for many that in a Greek sentence where subject and predicate were reversed, they would often translate by matching up each Greek word with a basic equivalent from the vocabulary translation list, and then proceed to form an English sentence in the same order, totally ignoring the persuasion of the case endings that are meant to suggest a word order for English. If the given word order did not this way produce sense, the students might then permute the words, often adding extra genitive or dative inflections in English along the way, until some seemingly sensible English statement resulted.

Actually, I came to feel that the students in general did not <u>believe</u> in the reality of case inflection as a linguistic determinant. They acknowledged that these bothersome matters existed in print, and would often translate accordingly; but just as often they would neglect to inflect a Greek word past its original vocabulary-list form in working from English to Greek, or would stubbornly refuse to honor the endings in working from Greek to English. An additional problem here was the distant subject world to which the content of so many of the sentences in the Chase-Phillips book refer. For once a translation precipitated from a proper and painstaking study of the noun endings, the result would not always strike the student as being a sensible sentence

that anyone would care to utter; this would then be rejected as improbable, and the student would either tamper seriously with the original in order to contrive a more satisfactory result, or would simply give up, with the consequent loss of faith in the new, and perhaps accurately applied, knowledge of case workings. Many of the sentences derive from Greek political or social philosophy, and were thus puzzling to the students: "Secure is the city whose citizens are just." Much worse: "Man's speech is the shadow of his reason," or "Darkness is cause for reason." These problems perhaps suggest the inadvisability of studying a far-distant language in the sterile context that largely ignores the culture that spawned the tongue.

The genitive and dative cases presented special problems. For here the use of English auxiliaries (of, for, to) is not directly indicated by the Greek, and the students needed to develop some abstract linguistic imagination in order to acquire a feel for, say, the possessive quality of the Greek genitive-inflected noun (or, more confusingly, noun phrase). This problem was compounded by some models of Greek word order which, in conjunction with clues provided by the case endings, require special re-ordering in English. Consider the Greek sentence which, word by word, yields: "The the friends words best." First of all, the sentence is (not atypic-

ally) elliptical for 'to be.' The subject and predicate endings of 'words' and 'best' would have to be matched up, yielding: "The words are best" (the first 'the' agreeing with 'words'). Then the 'the friends' is seen to be inflected for possession; thus: "The of-the-friends words are best" or "The words of friends are best." (Genitive inflection of articles stumped the students continually.)

As for the dative case, the notion of indirect object was mysterious to the students because of the syntactical streamlining in English: "I gave John the book." It was necessary to imagine confronting such an English sentence from the point of view of a non-native speaker, who might well be confused about the identity of the direct and indirect objects; such a pretense took some willingness and imagination on the part of the students.

A fine example that shows these related confusions with a humor that was not a rare by-product in our work involves the Greek sentence that literally yields: "The time physician the pain is." 'Time' and 'physician' are nominative and otherwise agree; they appear side by side in a typical subject/predicate pairing: "Time is a physician" (allowing for differences between Greek and English use of articles-- a further matter of confusion for the students). Then, 'the pain' is inflected with the genitive. Thus: "Time is the doctor

of pain" (= "Time heals all wounds"). Students' blatant inattention to case endings yielded such renderings as "Pain is the time to go to the doctor" and (this one additionally revealing a naivety about the use of slang) "Going to the doctor is a real pain."

The matter of gender was mysterious for the students again for its general lack of appearance in English, although many of them were familiar with the notion from Romance languages (almost exclusively Spanish, actually). But here at least the puzzles were standard linguistic problems that we could explore together: why are nouns classified according to gender at all? how did this come into being? when and why did the sexual connotation become involved? why do assignments to gender-class seem arbitrary and often counter-intuitive? (For example, the Greek word for 'child' is neuter.) Obviously, these discussions branched into the general subject of language, its history and nature.

In the world of verbs the first problem was that of person/number inflection, especially where no apparent subject is presented. (Pronoun forms are often absent in Greek sentences, the endings alone delivering the personal essence.) Of course here one could appeal to the largely degenerate vestige of person inflection in English, although a curious confusion for some students arose from the fact that the

single consistent leftover in this domain in English is the added 's' of the third person singular (I, you, we, they buy; but he buys), which in their minds conflicted with the noun plural indication of the same phoneme.

Further in the study of verbs, the students needed to examine the possibilities of tense more concretely than they would when speaking their own language naturally. Thus we needed first of all to distinguish between the finer shades of time-now, time-before and time-after in English. We did not progress far enough to engage in discussions of voice and mood, which surely would have complicated things greatly. But an interesting problem appeared in terms of English auxiliaries. To translate into Greek such a sentence as "I will go" a student might search his vocabulary index for the word 'will,' failing to realize, again, that the in-word inflection in Greek takes care of the typical English auxiliary. This confusion was especially present in past-tense negatives, such as "I did not go," where a student might not think to add a standard Greek negation to a simple past tense, but would search for the Greek form of 'do' or - worse - 'did.' Infinitives, with their English auxiliary, sparked the same trouble.

It will be seen in all these situations that the study of Greek language was unquestionably the focus of our work, but that constant rebound on our own language was in effect, and

the tangential areas of language generally (as in the question of gender) and the culture of Greece (as in the sentence contents) were regularly intruding. And it will further be seen that the most general purpose of the course, the learning about learning, was itself left largely unarticulated, being, I hoped, implicit in the whole experience. I would, of course, very frequently describe to the class the trouble I had with a certain new situation in our lessons, as I performed assignments in parallel with them. I would always demonstrate just how I was drawing on my previous experience with other languages and on my limited knowledge of linguistics. I shared with them, for example, a technique which a trained language teacher certainly would not need, but which was particularly useful in the self-directed learning that should underlie the philosophy of this mode. Often a concise and, especially, older language text (such as our Chasse and Phillips) will give a complex statement of summary of a particular part of the grammar of a language by way of introduction to the behavior of some words or phrases. This explanation, often at first devoid of actual examples, would typically be full of linguistic jargon terms, many of which may be totally unfamiliar to me ("enclitic," "postpositive"), others of which I recognize individually but cannot deal with readily in heavy concentration. The complex rules, for example, that govern the changes

that take place in the final consonant of a Greek verb stem when sigma must be inserted to form the regular future tense are described in our book in terms of "labial mutes" and other items that I recall from linguistics, and that are of course thoroughly unknown to the students; even so, the massive concentration of professional terms in a concise passage such as this one is prohibitive even for me. I would not advise the class in such a situation to search for definitions of each such jargon itemin the unrealistic hope of ultimately synthesizing the meaning of the passage. Rather I showed them my practice of skipping the forbidding material altogether and proceeding directly to the examples that often followed. By reflecting carefully on the matching behavior in English, I could often infer what portion of Greek grammar was being summarized. In some cases, even, a back-reference to the technical linguistic terms would in the light of the examples and their translations clarify the meanings of those items.

Thus, most of the goals of our experiment were met by an energetic attention to the details of the chosen subject matter, allowing the other areas to attend to themselves. It should be noted that certain critical features of Greek, such as the entire matter of accents, were omitted from our study by mutual agreement, as seeming to be - for better or worse -

external to our needs and goals. And further departing from usual practice in studying such languages, almost no memorizing was done. All work was open-book style, with paradigms available at every turn. We felt it more important to understand and know how to use a list than to have it at our fluent command (which of course would be essential in any study which had as its goal the acquisition of the language for reading, writing or speaking). Naturally, certain things that recurred frequently enough were gradually, if informally, absorbed, such as certain features of the vocabulary, or some areas of the paradigms for the declensions of "the" and the more common noun/adjective forms, and the simplest conjugations. Just the fact that a language is studied at the basic level for at least two years, while we met together for only a single semester, gives a clear indication of the radically different goals of this course and its perhaps new use of the study of a language. As a striking indicator of comparison even within the context of this limitation, I offer the fact that the Chase and Phillips book consists of forty-two chapters, and is intended for the first semester of study alone; in our experience we ended up covering only the first nine of these chapters!

The success of this experiment is exceedingly difficult to assess. On the one hand, I experienced it as a personal

success in the limited sense that I enjoyed myself, came to know some students outside of my department, and learned a little Greek. And some students, moreover, were directly stimulated by our work. However, it must be admitted that not only were a few very unhappy with this course, but the majority of them were hardly enthusiastic during much of the semester. As soon as their curiosity died down, many developed a dislike for the ambiguity of how the course could be seen in terms of their career needs or even their educational goals. (All students were allowed to claim this course as part of their general liberal studies requirements.)

Very few students at this level and at this kind of school possess any appreciable intellectual curiosity, and so much of what delighted me in our work simply bored or puzzled them. But we strongly hope that the rigors of a study like this, combined with certain doors the subject may have opened, will bear fruit later on in their college work, even if indirectly. (The entire Freshman Seminar program is being subjected to some longitudinal statistical account.)

Perhaps the attitude of the typical student can be assessed from the following anecdote. On the final examination I presented a Greek sentence which ought to have worked out to "Pleasures do not always educate men." The usual con-

fusions described above, coupled perhaps with a touch of hostility, produced in one case this result: "Education is not always a pleasure."

We do, nevertheless, plan to continue. Mine was the only section of the Master Learner mode that utilized a language as its topic, and the implications of the idea, as sketched here, have pleased us enough to suggest consideration of a reservation of the entire mode, or the establishment of a separate mode, for the study of languages. Regrettably, foreign language requirements do not exist at our college. But an idea in our minds is to see what happens if all incoming freshman routinely pass through a special one-term experience studying a language, perhaps a decidedly far-removed one, for just the purposes I have been discussing. To that end, several of us on the project staff have volunteered to try again next fall, with Japanese, Chinese and Sanskrit as our banners.